DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 025 CS 500 777

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TITLE From Written Film History to Visual Film History.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives (30th, Montreal, May 25-27, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Colleges; *Content Analysis; Course Content; *Film Libraries; Films; *Film Study; Repetitive Film Showings; Research Libraries; Research Methodology; *Structural Analysis; Universities

ABSTRACT

The poor quality of most university courses in film history is due to several factors, among them the fact that there is insufficient analytical documentation and direct cinematic illustration in existent written film histories. These histories examine films on a thematic level, offering noncinematic interpretation such as literary meaning, social significance, philosophical connotation, and the historical paraphernalia surrounding films. To partially resolve this problem, serious film research on classic films and specific cinematic styles should be undertaken, and archives of film classics should be established which allow repeated viewings of films and parts of films in the close structural analysis of sequences. In addition, a cinematic methodology including direct investigation of the formal strategy of certain groups of films should be permitted. A proposed project, the visual/analytical history of silent cinema, would involve films as primary study material, accompanied by shot-by-shot analysis and evaluation. (JM)

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ED 093025

FROM WRITTEN FILM HISTORY TO VISUAL FILM HISTORY

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May 1974

Presented to the Conference on the Teaching of Film

CS 500 777

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FROM WRITTEN FILM HISTORY TO VISUAL FILM HISTORY

It is commonly known that the quality of most courses in film history is abysmally low when compared to courses in other disciplines taught at universities. It is also true that cinema, in general, has never been approached with the scholarly method which is applied to other arts and humanistic disciplines. One -- and not insignificant -- reason for such situation is the lack of sufficient analytical documentation and direct cinematic illustration in existent written film histories.

In explaining and defining specific periods and trends, the written histories only have the capacity to examine films on a thematic level; instead of cinematic analysis they offer various sorts of non-cinematic interpretation. As such, they cannot perform or encourage a rigorous cinematic study of classic films. Consequently, without the access to primary research material, and deprived of direct examination of filmic structure which demonstrates the evolution of this medium, students in film history are compelled to concentrate on literary meaning, social significance, philosophical connotation and historical paraphernalia surrounding films. Most teachers of film history are aware of this situation, but almost nothing has been undertaken to achieve even a partial resolution to this problem. Educational institutions often award grants to scholars who promise to write about films, but do not support or even consider research that include film stock as part of the completed work. It is said that any

project involving celluloid itself belongs to the commercial rental companies. But, film is simply merchandise to film enterprises, and they have no interest in promoting scholarly film appreciation. These rental companies insist that a film is screened only once in the classrooms, with a remark printed with big letters at the end of each reel: "Do not rewind!" Even with such a profit-making policy, however, catalogues of some rental companies contain series designed for teaching film history. One is flabbergasted with the titles they offer for a "basic film history course."[1]

On the other hand, film archives and museums all over the world, though they are less commercial and more systematized in the classification of their films, also function on business lines when circulating prints. Thus, they do not substantially help univerversities and colleges in their attempt to incorporate film appreciation into the humanistic curriculum. No wonder that under these circumstances the study of film history amounts to the cinema-club type film series, that is to little more than entertainment. In other disciplines, practice is different. For example, students in musicology have access to musical scores and tapes of great compositions and their performances. Imagine if their sole contact with classic works was limited to one concert performance, or if students of literature were restricted to one reading of a classic novel. Only the study of film history depends on one or two viewings of classic films, so that the research is mostly based on and limited to the descriptive and interpretative

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1. The most recent Audio Brandon catalogue advertises a section of films designed to the study of Film History of various eras and countries. The American cinema of the 1920's is represented by 8 Keatons, 4 Langdons, 1 Chaplin film, Niblo's The Mark of Zorro, Fleming's The Mollycoddle, Griffith's Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm, America, Worsley's The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Cruze's The Covered Wagon, and Julian's The Phantom of the Opera.

written material.

Here I am concerned with the analytical/critical film histories that can help students to understand and experience the cinematic values of film classics and their significance in a historical perspective. I am not refering to those film histories that investigate the evolution of cinema from a thematic, factual, anecdotal or social point of view, neglecting cinematic qualities of the great films and their specific auditory/visual structure.

In the rare cases when renown film historians, such as Georges Sadoul, Rachel Low, Lewis Jacobs and Lotte Eisner, analyze classic films as cinematic achievements, they are often unable to provide sufficient filmic documentation. When they quote sequences from great films in the form of shot-by-shot analysis, one is never sure if the description of shots, their duration and order, the mise-en-scène within the frame, and the auditory component is correct and to what extent this literary description reflects the real structure of the sequences. For example, I reviewed all the texts included in the series Classic Film Scripts and Modern Film Scripts and found that no less than 90% of their break down of the visual and auditory structure is inaccurate, and therefore useless for serious film study. Similarly, many inaccurate descriptions of sequences from great films have been, for decades, passed on from one history to another without being checked and corrected. Students in film history have no opportunity to evaluate these materials. After seeing a film, they have no other choice but to continue their research utilizing incomplete and equivocal documentation. In fact, students are researching into the established film histories or the evolution of film criticism rather than into films themselves:

film histories or the evolution of film criticism rather than in the history of films themselves: this is the sociology of knowledge and not analytical research in film history. As a result, the methodological procedure is conveived to serve other interests and not to facilitate the students' appreciation of the specific cinematic styles, such as German Expressionism, Soviet Montage School, or American Western. Without being able to compare written statements and evaluations with the visual structure of the corresponding segments, stude-ts in film appreciation are not only misinformed, but they are misled. How can they sharpen or improve their cinematjc sensitivity? How can anyone develop an appropriate cinematic methodology in the historical evaluation of films? How can we even discuss the "current tasks for film historians" if we do not create the appropriate conditions for the young film historians who are emerging from the scholarly institutions?

As I said, we are all aware of this situation in film history programs at universities, but no attempt is undertaken to extract us from this quagmire. It seems important for those who are attending this symposium, to agree that no advancement in methodology of film history is possible without the help of the film archives which have the source material for the proper study of film classics. Unfortunately, though we generally assume that film archives function in the same manner as libraries act for the study of history of literature or phonotheques for the study of history of music, in practice however, the conditions for studying film history are worse than those for studying theatre history which is notorious for its lack of pertinent documentation. For

obvious reasons, the study of theatre history concentrates on classic dramatic texts as the basis for examining theatrical styles and different trends in stage mise-en-scene, but these texts exist in their original form and are available for in-depth analysis, while screen-plays are not regularly published and they are not the equivalent to a shot-by-shot analysis of the completed film. We have Cocteau's script of Le Sang d'un Poete, but it cannot serve as the prime material for the scholarly film analysis. Even the most professional description of each shot cannot provide students with an accurate notion of a film's structure and its kinesthetic impact. It has to be, as Eisenstein advocated to his students, experienced through the process of screening over and over again and by close analysis of sequences on the editing table. In most film history courses, students are forced to rely only on their memory during a few viewings of a film. It is painful to attend some of these pseudo-film history courses and listen to discussions which reveal an utter lack of cinematic consciousness in both the students and the teacher. I think everybody agrees that this method cannot be considered a serious study ofthe history of cinema at Universitjes. Teachers constantly face difficulties with using written film histories whenever they attempt to explain specific cinematic devices, even when they have screened a film several times. It is one thing to read a novel or to attend the screening of a film, and it is another to analyze and understand a specific structure In the same way the shot-by-shot analysis has meaning only when it is accompanied by a close explanation of its formal sturcture.

A symposium like this one offers a unique opportunity for finding proper ways of solving the problem: gathered here are

film scholars and teachers of film history, together with representatives and curators of film archives, to discuss "the approaches to film history in the past" and to find "the ways in which film history should be approached today and the most important current tasks for film historians." A starting point to discuss the methodology of film history must include the two facts existing in contemporary film appreciation:

1) There is not a single analytical/critical written film history that provides cinematically pertinent data and an adequate explanation of the cinematic structure of the classic films; separate films and individual filmmakers - yes, but of historic periods or genres - no!

2) Students in film history have no opportunity for a direct and filmic analysis of the visual and auditory/visual structure of the classic films; as a result, the basic notion of cinema and the methodology of studying its history proves to be anti-dinematic!

Having this in mind, one may assume that "the most important current tasks for film historians" require a professional reevaluation of the cinematic qualities of all classic films. In other scholarly disciplines, progress stems from the historians' repeated delving into the primary sources in order to expand our body of knowledge with new and authentic information. Similarly a modern film history must be accompanied by film excerpts and accurate shot-by-shot analysis of the most significant sequences and an explanation of the formal plan used by the film-maker. This is true not only for the silent film history but also for that of the contemporary cinema. Just recently, one of my graduate students had to waste a lot of his time and energy securing prints of Miklos Jancso's three films in order to study the structure and function of their long takes. Only because of lucky circumstances and his perseverence was he finally able to have access to the three films, and study each of them for several days. But it proved impossible for him to look at the same films again and later on to confirm and correct

his subsequent findings. In these circumstances, how can one ever speak of applying the proper methodology in film history? and indeed, how could a professional film historian, dealing with the history of a whole period involving hundreds of films, manage in such a situation?

It seems that the appropriate methodology of film history cannot be attained in our time without the full cooperation of the film archives which possess the prints and who have access to technical pacilities, without which it is impossible to grasp the cinematic structure of a film.

We have reached an impasse where not only it is impossible, but also it is unacceptable, to teach and study film history on the basis of the existing books and with the entertainment-like approach of presenting films as mere illustration of film history lectures. Furthermore, this impasse cannot be overcome by merely publishing film histories which will include accurate shot-by-shot analysis of the classic films, this is not enough, and something more has to be done.

The resolution of this problem should become the "most important task' for contemporary film historians. Two processes are involved in dealing with this task. On the one hand, the film archives should allow historians to study all the important silent films on an analyser, so that they might achieve a precise description and an analytical explanation of the structure and devices used by great filmmakers. On the other hand, the more analytical the description the historian wants to achieve the more it will be necessary for him to assemble and present filmic documentation that will permit direct re-evaluation of the specific films and the

entire trends. Only a minute cinematographic analysis of films can help the students in film history to anticipate the kinesthetic impact of certain films and to examine their formal structure. They cannot fully achieve this without being free to stop the image and review the sequences as many times as it is necessary. Only with these facilities can one study film history seriously, and follow the evolution of the medium methodologically.

In conclusion, one must emphasize that written film histories are oriented to other disciplines and therefore lead the students outside the nature of this medium. Although such histories can be extremely relevant for various academic fields related to cinema, or to the extra-cinematic components existent in films, they have little in common with the appreciation of the cinematic language and the filmic structure. Finally, the study of film history will remain perfunctory and interpretative until its methodology is used to understand the cinema's own language. One cannot talk about the methodology of film history without direct investigation of the formal strategy of certain groups of films. Otherwise, one simply applies to cinema the methodology fromother disciplines, be it sociology, philosophy, lingustics or history itself. Let us, finally, make possible a cinematic methodology for cinema. We must permit this, if we believe in cinema as a medium which possesses its own nature.

To document this paper I am proposing a Visual/Analytical History of the Silent Cinema whose primary study material are films themselves accompanied with shot-by-shot analysis and their evaluation. Such a project cannot be realized without the full

cooperation of a film archive, and the financial assistence of an educational institution. More than fifty films would be cited, and for the analysis of their cinematic values the author or authors must have unlimited access to the films. In addition to analysis, the chosen segments must be assembled and properly reprinted to accompany every text-book as the prime material presented on celluloid in the form of an 8 hour film.

Is there any archive that is willing to undertake the realization of this project? Is there an institution that would support it financially? At present, it is unlikely. The following proposal can serve as a methodology for teaching a course in silent film history with the obligatory screening of the suggested films.